

Signet Classics

TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES

THOMAS HARDY

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY MARCELLE CLEMENTS



Tess of the D'Urbervilles

A Pure Woman



Faithfully presented by
THOMAS HARDY

“. . . Poor wounded name! My bosom
as a bed / Shall lodge thee.”

—W. SHAKESPEARE

*With a New Introduction by
Marcelle Clements*


SIGNET CLASSICS

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Born on Egdon Heath, made famous in his novels, **Thomas Hardy** (1840–1928) worked as an architect for several years. But poetry, which he wrote in his spare time, would prove his first and last literary love. By 1874, he was convinced that he could earn his living as an author and retired from architecture, married, and devoted himself to writing. An extremely prolific novelist, Hardy produced an important book every year or two. In 1896, disturbed by the public outcry over taboo subjects broached in two of his greatest novels, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, he announced that he would write only poetry. In later years, he was bestowed many honors and, upon his death, was buried with much ceremony in Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey.

Marcelle Clements is a novelist and journalist who has contributed articles on culture, the arts, and politics to many national publications. She is the author of two books of nonfiction, *The Dog Is Us* and *The Improvised Woman*, and the novels *Rock Me* and *Midsummer*. She teaches Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* at New York University.

INTRODUCTION

For readers who are smitten by nineteenth-century literature (and we are legion), Thomas Hardy's fiction is blissful. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman*, especially, is one of those books that makes you fall in love with reading and with novels, so deeply in love that you have no plan to recover, just as Tess herself remains steadfast in the reader's memory. "Like the greatest characters in literature," writes Irving Howe, "Tess lives beyond the final pages of the book as a permanent citizen of the imagination." Hardy's most alluring, tragic creation, she seems to dance into our sight line when we first meet her in the novel as a virginal child-woman, one of many in a May Day procession.

The banded ones were all dressed in white gowns—a gay survival from Old Style days, when cheerfulness and May-time were synonyms—days before the habit of taking long views had reduced emotions to a monotonous average. . . . Ideal and real clashed slightly as the sun lit up their figures against the green hedges and creeper-laced house-fronts; for, though the whole troop wore white garments, no two whites were alike among them. Some approached pure blanching; some had a bluish pallor; some worn by the older characters (which had possibly lain by folded for many a year) inclined to a cadaverous tint, and to a Georgian style.

. . . [Tess] was a fine and handsome girl—not handsomer than some others, possibly—but her mobile peony mouth and large innocent eyes added eloquence to colour and shape. She wore a red ribbon in her hair, and was the only one of the white company who could boast of such a pronounced adornment.

Indeed, the color red will often recur in Tess's most intensely lived moments and it is hard to think of her otherwise than adorned by it. "Tess Durbeyfield at this time of her life was a mere vessel of emotion untinged by experience," Hardy tells us. She will become bitterly experienced, but not less passionate. The red ribbon foreshadows the "dull crimson fire" that will flush her face when she is angry, the "scarlet oozing" of wounds, the color of pain, of regret, the dull ache of modernism."

Hardy's thirteenth novel, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is a melodrama in the hands of a master, replete with both emotion and intelligence, quasi-operatic in its use of the characters' suffering, but also suffused with Hardy's longing for disappearing rural England, especially his own Dorset, "this fertile and sheltered tract of country, in which the fields are never brown and the springs never dry." The pleasure that *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, first serialized in the summer of 1891, provides its readers has not only survived the ferocious attacks of critics and moralists who decried the "sordid" tale and its stylistic "folderol," but also withstood the explorations of innumerable scholars and theorists in the last hundred years, maintaining its literary freshness, its aura of transcendent beauty and its richness of character, language, voice, images and vision.

Its story line both exemplifies and defies conventions of Victorian country life in the mid-nineteenth century. Teresa Durbeyfield is fresh, pretty and innocent, the eldest of five children in a family of poor farmers in Marlott, a village that "lay amid the north-eastern undulations of the beautiful Vale of Blackmore, or Blackmoor . . . , an engirdled and secluded region, for the most part untrodden as yet by tourist or landscape-painter, though within a four hours' journey from London." She encounters a wealthy bounder and following either a seduction or a rape, depending on your interpretation, becomes pregnant. She refuses to accept support from him and returns to her family. When her baby dies, she leaves home again and goes to work in a dairy farm. There she reencounters the ardent and idealistic Angel Clare, youngest son of a parson, once glimpsed at the May dance. They fall in love and marry. The denouement of Tess's story is well known, but I will not repeat it here, for this is one of those novels that can be read for plot.

A great part of the pleasure of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is that it so often surprises us, beginning on page one, when John

Durbeyfield, Tess's father, turns out not to be the brutal, drunken peasant of convention but, in addition, a descendant of the d'Urbervilles, a noble Norman family who came to England eight centuries previously with William the Conqueror. Tess's mother has heard of a Mrs. d'Urberville, who lives some distance away and, on the assumption she may turn out to be a useful rich relation, compels Tess to travel there. As it happens, this nouveau riche family's real name is Stoke, and Mrs. d'Urberville's name was purchased. The bounder, Alexander d'Urberville, is her son.

But he isn't a perfect bounder, just as Tess is not a perfect victim. Indeed, it turns out she is no plain farm girl: a good student, she managed to get to the sixth form, and when the story opens, she is a schoolteacher. So she is in fact relatively educated and of noble birth. The evocation of the Norman Conquest is one of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* many masterly thematic grace notes. To this day, 1066 and the Battle of Hastings remain highly resonant in English history. The Norman invaders were mercilessly ambitious, and within a generation, England had been brought into the feudal system. The English landscape was dotted with a thousand castles, but its primitive Anglo-Saxon life was forever ended. Hardy reminds us of Tess's lineage only now and then in some of the most vivid images of the novel. At one point, for instance, Alec taunts Tess, who has been working in the field, by attacking the missing Angel Clare:

Her face had been rising to a dull crimson fire while he spoke; but she did not answer.

"You have been the cause of my backsliding," he continued, stretching his arm towards her waist; "you should be willing to share it, and leave that mule you call husband for ever."

One of her leather gloves, which she had taken off to eat her skimmer-cake, lay in her lap, and without the slightest warning she passionately swung the glove by the gauntlet directly in his face. It was heavy and thick as a warrior's, and it struck him flat on the mouth. Fancy might have regarded the act as the recrudescence of a trick in which her armed progenitors were not unpractised. Alec fiercely started up from his reclining position. A scarlet oozing appeared where her blow had alighted,

and in a moment the blood began dropping from his mouth upon the straw. But he soon controlled himself, calmly drew his handkerchief from his pocket, and mopped his bleeding lips.

She too had sprung up, but she sank down again. "Now, punish me!" she said, turning up her eyes to him with the hopeless defiance of the sparrow's gaze before its captor twists its neck. "Whip me, crush me; you need not mind those people under the rick! I shall not cry out. Once victim, always victim—that's the law!"

Ah. But what sort of a victim can articulate that law? Not *Clarissa*, a perfect innocent, ravished a hundred years earlier in Richardson's novel, where the law was first expressed by the author, nor Hawthorne's *Hester Prynne*, who mutely wore her scarlet letter. Whereas *Tess* talks, questions, thinks, rethinks, acts, is passive, and starts all over again. She is object and subject. She comes alive under the male gaze—Alec's, Angel's and also, of course, Hardy's—but she is also an actor in her world, a progenitor of life and ideas, even if they must soon die. And neither her seducer nor her husband is rigid and fixed in any one male sensibility. Both Alec and Angel evolve according to mood, time and place and in response to *Tess* herself. And nothing about *Tess* is ever static. Even our view of her noble ancestry is made to shift and reshift as her story progresses.

"Heaven, why did you give me a handle for despising you more by informing me of your descent!" Angel vehemently demands to know. "Here was I thinking you a new-sprung child of nature; there were you, the belated seedling of an effete aristocracy!" Alternately completing and shattering a classic triangle, Angel Clare will similarly defeat every prediction you may make about what could have been a quintessential nineteenth-century morality play—even a very good one—if it had been written by, say, Somerset Maugham or Stefan Zweig.

And, paradoxically perhaps, *Tess* is unforgettable in part because she is undefinable, even to her lovers. When Alec touches her briefly, that first night, as she is sitting on a pile of leaves, wearing a pale, puffy muslin gown, his fingers "sank into her as into down."

Where did *Tess* come from? Some critics say that she owes

a great deal to Richardson's *Clarissa* or to Mrs. Gaskell's *Ruth*. Others mention George Eliot's early stories, describing rural life, or *Nana*, by the French naturalist Emile Zola, whom Hardy certainly admired. But while he read widely, his stated preferences in fiction turn out to be far more intriguing than these predictable predecessors would lead us to believe: "James is almost the only novelist I can read, & taken in small doses I like him exceedingly, being as he is a real man of letters," he wrote to a friend. It's difficult to imagine that there is such a thing as a small dose of Henry James but, in any event, *The Portrait of a Lady's* Isabel Archer seems like a worthy addition to the unlikely group already formed by *Clarissa*, *Ruth* and *Nana*. And then you must add the Bible and, of course, Darwin, whom Hardy read and was stunned by when he was around twenty years old. There were his cherished Greek plays, as well, whose influence is everywhere in this book. From the very start, Tess's trajectory is that of a heroine whose tragedy is preordained.

"Did you say the stars were worlds, Tess," her little brother, Abraham, asks her. It is night. They are sitting by the side of the road, near their dead horse and their useless cart, waiting for the mail-cart man to come back for them and give them a ride back into town. Tess answers her brother:

"Yes."

"All like ours?"

"I don't know, but I think so. They sometimes seem to be like the apples on our stubborn tree. Most of them splendid and sound—a few blighted."

"Which do we live on—a splendid one or a blighted one?"

"A blighted one."

Like the heroes of the Greek plays Hardy loved, Tess doesn't succeed in escaping her destiny. Instead, when her struggles are to no avail, she watches her fate unfold and wonders at the ways of the world, which she has learned too late. "I shouldn't mind learning why—why the sun do shine on the just and unjust alike." We watch as she wonders and we cannot help ourselves if we feel hope on her behalf—more hope, no doubt, than she is capable of—but we know why Tess cannot

escape. With the perspective of more than a hundred years, we can map the geology of the blighted star: the repercussions of the industrial revolution, the extinction of rural life, the implacable laws of caste, gender and morality in Victorian England.

So we can imagine what might happen to Tess, long before she does. And we know what must happen when she meets Alec d'Urberville: "Alec looked at Tess as he spoke, in a way that made her blush a little. 'And so, my pretty girl, you've come on a friendly visit to us, as relations?'"

But the switch is that the novel will not end when Tess gives birth to the fruit of her ignorance. Her destiny may already be settled, but her story is not. As Hardy puts it in his preface to the fifth and later editions: "This novel being one wherein the great campaign of the heroine begins after an event in her experience which has usually been treated as fatal to her part of protagonist, or at least as the virtual ending of her enterprises and hopes . . ."

In fact our own emotional connection with Tess deepens with her supposed fall and we will remain attached to her long after "Justice" was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess. And the d'Urberville knights and dames slept on in their tombs unknowing."

For Hardy, *Tess* represented a leap forward in his writing. He thought it his finest novel, and Tess was his favorite character. He had already published twelve books, starting with *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, which was serialized in the *Cornhill Magazine* (and much admired by the young Marcel Proust) and including *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Return of the Native* (1878) and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886). His reputation was formidable but it did not protect him against the puritanical sensibilities of the editors of *Macmillan Magazine*, who refused to serialize *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* unless he removed passages deemed offensive. He returned his advance and took the manuscript elsewhere, but without success. He finally did dismantle the novel for serialization, removing the illegitimate child and, even more astoundingly, much of the substance of Tess's relationships with both men who would be her lovers. He published the excised passages separately, referring to them in his preface to the first edition as having been "more especially addressed to adult readers." He thanks his

editors “for enabling me now to piece the trunks and limbs of the novel together and print it complete.”

Adult and complete with trunks and limbs, *Tess* was controversial among critics and in the literary establishment—for some because of its moral content, but for others because of what was thought to be its stylistic lapses. Even the “real man of letters,” Henry James, expressed mixed feelings, and thought *Tess* “chock-full of faults and falsities and yet [possessed of] a singular beauty and charm.” In private he was blunter, and in a letter to Robert Louis Stevenson, he said that *Tess* “is vile. The pretense of ‘sexuality’ is only equalled by the absence of it, and the abomination of the language by the author’s reputation for style.”

Undoubtedly, what was seen as “faults and falsities” were the contradictions, disjunctions and the ambiguity that would prove so attractive to the hundreds of psychoanalytic, cultural, feminist and literary theorists who have explored *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* since its publication. The English theorist J. Hillis Miller calls Thomas Hardy’s “unmappable” and has written: “The topography of that mind cannot be charted.” The better one knows *Tess*, the more one comes to love its combination of passion and ambiguity, its cultural discontinuities, and the evidence of its author’s own complex emotions toward his characters, alternating respect, voyeurism, and an almost voluptuous compassion.

The early negative reaction left Hardy inconsolable, despite the groundswell of enthusiasm from other writers, which would continue to grow long after *Tess*’s publication. In Virginia Woolf’s opinion, “[it] is a vision of the world and of man’s lot as they revealed themselves to a powerful imagination, a profound and poetic genius.” D. H. Lawrence would say of Hardy that his “feeling, his instinct, his sensuous understanding is . . . very great and deep, deeper than that, perhaps, of any other English novelist.”

Readers at large either took no note of the critics’ point of view or their interests were inflamed by the controversy, and *Tess* was soon a great public success. Despite healthy sales and what turned out to be the novel’s longevity, Hardy could never recover from the early attacks. “Well, if this sort of thing continues no more novel-writing for me,” he wrote to a friend after reading an egregiously nasty review. When precisely this sort of thing did continue with the publication of his fourteenth

novel, *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Thomas Hardy made good his threat. Supporting himself with the money he had made from *Tess*, he restricted himself to poetry for the next thirty years and never wrote another novel.

—Marcelle Clements

Tess of the
D'Urbervilles

EXPLANATORY NOTE TO THE FIRST EDITION

The main portion of the following story appeared—with slight modifications—in the *Graphic* newspaper; other chapters, more especially addressed to adult readers, in the *Fortnightly Review* and the *National Observer*, as episodic sketches. My thanks are tendered to the editors and proprietors of those periodicals for enabling me now to piece the trunk and limbs of the novel together and print it complete, as originally written two years ago.

I will just add that the story is sent out in all sincerity of purpose, as an attempt to give artistic form to a true sequence of things; and in respect of the book's opinions and sentiments, I would ask any too genteel reader, who cannot endure to have said what everybody nowadays thinks and feels, to remember a well-worn sentence of St. Jerome's: If an offence come out of the truth, better is it that the offence come than that the truth be concealed.

T. H.

November, 1891

PREFACE TO THE FIFTH AND LATER EDITIONS

This novel being one wherein the great campaign of the heroine begins after an event in her experience which has usually been treated as fatal to her part of protagonist, or at least as the virtual ending of her enterprises and hopes, it was quite

contrary to avowed conventions that the public should welcome the book and agree with me in holding that there was something more to be said in fiction than had been said about the shaded side of a well-known catastrophe. But the responsive spirit in which *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* has been received by the readers of England and America would seem to prove that the plan of laying down a story on the lines of tacit opinion, instead of making it to square with the merely vocal formulae of society, is not altogether a wrong one, even when exemplified in so unequal and partial an achievement as the present. For this responsiveness I cannot refrain from expressing my thanks; and my regret is that, in a world where one so often hungers in vain for friendship, where even not to be wilfully misunderstood is felt as a kindness, I shall never meet in person these appreciative readers, male and female, and shake them by the hand.

I include amongst them the reviewers—by far the majority—who have so generously welcomed the tale. Their words show that they, like the others, have only too largely repaired my defects of narration by their own imaginative intuition.

Nevertheless, though the novel was intended to be neither didactic nor aggressive, but in the scenic parts to be representative simply, and in the contemplative to be oftener charged with impressions than with convictions, there have been objectors both to the matter and to the rendering.

The more austere of these maintain a conscientious difference of opinion concerning, among other things, subjects fit for art, and reveal an inability to associate the idea of the subtitle adjective with any but the artificial and derivative meaning which has resulted to it from the ordinances of civilization. They ignore the meaning of the word in nature, together with all aesthetic claims upon it, not to mention the spiritual interpretation afforded by the finest side of their own Christianity. Others dissent on grounds which are intrinsically no more than an assertion that the novel embodies the views of life prevalent at the end of the nineteenth century, and not those of an earlier and simpler generation—an assertion which I can only hope may be well founded. Let me repeat that a novel is an impres-

sion, not an argument; and there the matter must rest; as one is reminded by a passage which occurs in the letters of Schiller to Goethe on judges of this class: "They are those who seek only their own ideas in a representation, and prize that which should be as higher than what is. The cause of the dispute, therefore, lies in the very first principles, and it would be utterly impossible to come to an understanding with them." And again: "As soon as I observe that any one, when judging of poetical representations, considers anything more important than the inner Necessity and Truth, I have done with him."

In the introductory words to the first edition I suggested the possible advent of the genteel person who would not be able to endure something or other in these pages. That person duly appeared among the aforesaid objectors. In one case he felt upset that it was not possible for him to read the book through three times, owing to my not having made that critical effort which "alone can prove the salvation of such an one." In another, he objected to such vulgar articles as the Devil's pitchfork, a lodging-house carving-knife, and a shame-bought parasol appearing in a respectable story. In another place he was a gentleman who turned Christian for half an hour the better to express his grief that a disrespectful phrase about the Immortals should have been used; though the same innate gentility compelled him to excuse the author in words of pity that one cannot be too thankful for: "He does but give us of his best." I can assure this great critic that to exclaim illogically against the gods, singular or plural, is not such an original sin of mine as he seems to imagine. True, it may have some local originality; though if Shakespeare were an authority on history, which perhaps he is not, I could show that the sin was introduced into Wessex as early as the Heptarchy itself. Says Glo'ster in *Lear*, otherwise Ina, king of that country:

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;
They kill us for their sport.

The remaining two or three manipulators of *Tess* were of the predetermined sort whom most writers and readers would gladly

forget; professed literary boxers, who put on their convictions for the occasion; modern "Hammers of Heretics"; sworn Discouragers, ever on the watch to prevent the tentative half-success from becoming the whole success later on; who pervert plain meanings and grow personal under the name of practising the great historical method. However, they may have causes to advance, privileges to guard, traditions to keep going; some of which a mere tale-teller, who writes down how the things of the world strike him, without any ulterior intentions whatever, has overlooked and may by pure inadvertence have run foul of when in the least aggressive mood. Perhaps some passing perception, the outcome of a dream hour, would, if generally acted on, cause such an assailant considerable inconvenience with respect to position, interests, family, servant, ox, ass, neighbour, or neighbour's wife. He therefore valiantly hides his personality behind a publisher's shutters and cries "Shame!" So densely is the world thronged that any shifting of positions, even the best-warranted advance, galls somebody's kibe. Such shiftings often begin in sentiment, and such sentiment sometimes begins in a novel.

July, 1892

The foregoing remarks were written during the early career of this story, when a spirited public and private criticism of its points was still fresh to the feelings. The pages are allowed to stand for what they are worth, as something once said; but probably they would not have been written now. Even in the short time which has elapsed since the book was first published, some of the critics who provoked the reply have "gone down into silence," as if to remind one of the infinite unimportance of both their say and mine.

January, 1895

The present edition of this novel contains a few pages that have never appeared in any previous edition. When the de-